

Joint Legislative Public Hearings On the 2023-2024 Executive Budget Proposal

Testimony before

The New York State Senate Finance Committee

And

The New York State Assembly Ways and Means Committee on the Mental  
Hygiene Budget.

Fountain House

Thank you for this opportunity to present Fountain House's testimony concerning the State's budget for the upcoming fiscal year. Fountain House is a national nonprofit that fights to improve health, increase opportunity, and end social and economic isolation for people most impacted by mental illness.

Since our inception, Fountain House has used a community-based social rehabilitation program and pioneered the "clubhouse model." The clubhouse model starts with the idea that "community is therapy," with each clubhouse being a community-based location designed to support the recovery and mitigate social isolation of people living with serious mental illness. Each clubhouse provides a restorative environment for people whose lives have been severely disrupted because of their mental illness. Currently, we operate two clubhouses in New York, our Manhattan Clubhouse at West 47<sup>th</sup> Street which has been operating since the 1940s, and our Bronx clubhouse which has been in operation since 2012.

We work with 1,500 to 2,000 members at our Manhattan location and 200 members at our Bronx location. We use the term "member" to reflect the voluntary, community-based nature of clubhouses. Our members are integral to the operation of our clubhouses and active participants within our programs. Without them, our clubhouses, which we keep deliberately understaffed to convey the power of members working in a strengths-based environment hand in hand with staff, would cease to function.

The clubhouse model centers the belief that work, and work-mediated relationships are restorative and provide a firm foundation for growth and important individual achievement rooted in agency and self-determination. Clubhouses operate on the belief that normalized social and recreational opportunities are an important part of an individual's recovery.

The idea of work and community as a means of therapy are not new ideas. However, the clubhouse model has numerous new methods that make the model different and groundbreaking. One such example is that the clubhouse model is centered around member choice, which coupled with other areas of emphasis allow members to find their own identity and sense of self and self-purpose.

As an organization that works with individuals living with serious mental illness, we are very excited to see that the Governor is making such a large investment in the mental health continuum. Ensuring that everyone who needs support can receive support is the best way to build out a healthier New York.

As important as this investment is, we are dismayed that there is no funding to support clubhouses within the executive budget proposal. While there are several clubhouses operating within New York City, including Fountain House, there are none upstate. By leaving the clubhouse model out of the mental health care continuum, New Yorkers living with serious mental illness, including those in more rural areas, will not receive an adequate level of care to address their full range of needs, including negative symptoms like loneliness and social isolation – which may lead to unnecessary morbidity, mortality, healthcare, and social services costs.

Research shows on a consistent basis that outcomes for people with serious mental illness are tied to recovery of dignity, hope, self-direction, a coherent sense of identity, and the achievement of quality of life. Largely speaking – loneliness has been identified as one of the leading unmet needs among people with serious mental illness. Randomized controlled trials have indicated that clubhouse members experience a significantly improved quality of life because they were involved with the clubhouse model, compared to those individuals who participated in other models.<sup>1</sup>

More people need access to the quality and compassionate care that clubhouses offer, not just in New York City, but also upstate. The benefits to not just our neighbors and family who live with serious mental illness but also New York state are immeasurable. At Fountain House specifically, an NYU study has found that our program has reduced Medicaid costs by 21% relative to a comparable high-risk serious mental illness population. We know that clubhouses provide results and help those living with serious mental illness and implore the Legislature to ensure that there are investments in the tried-and-true clubhouse method.

Until upstate communities have their own clubhouses, or for those areas where coverage may be harder due to distance, we recommend that the Legislature invest in a virtual clubhouse. At the start of the pandemic when in-person gatherings were limited and social isolation was at its peak, Fountain House implemented our Virtual Clubhouse program. While in-person meetings are preferred, our online program helped continue a level of connected care to our members and fend off the social isolation we feared could occur. While our current online clubhouse abilities are limited, for \$1 million in funding, we at Fountain House would be able to expand our current virtual clubhouse to provide statewide support within a year. As a bridge, while we await the building of brick-and-mortar clubhouses around the state, people living with SMI could begin to receive the connected care they deserve.

To correctly address the concerns of those living with serious mental illness, we must produce solutions collaboratively as there is no simple fix. We must also do so in a way that allows people living with serious mental illness to be at the table. We cannot develop a truly effective system unless we are able to reflect the impact of the real-lived experiences of those living with serious mental illness. We respectfully invite all members of the Legislature to visit Fountain House either at our Bronx or Manhattan clubhouse locations to get a better understanding of the work that we do to curb loneliness and social isolation for people living with serious mental illness and to strengthen ties with those in this community who will benefit from your vision. Our approach has been described as a “safety net” that can lift people with serious illness out of the worsening and unsustainable cycles of homelessness, hospitalization and incarceration. We believe you will agree.

---

<sup>1</sup> Chen, Y., Yau, E., Lam, C., Deng, H., Weng, Y., Liu, T., & Mo, X. (2019). A 6-month randomized controlled pilot study on the effects of the clubhouse model of psychosocial rehabilitation with Chinese individuals with schizophrenia. *Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10488-019-00976-5> 26; McKay, C., Nugent, K. L., Johnsen, M., Eaton, W. W., & Lidz, C. W. (2018). A Systematic Review of Evidence for the Clubhouse Model of Psychosocial Rehabilitation. *Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research*; New York, 45(1), 28– 47. <http://dx.doi.org.proxy.lib.wayne.edu/10.1007/s10488-016-0760-3>

